

Felicitous Space

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by

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ABSTRACT

The exhibition Felicitous Space is an inquiry into the significance of the emotional connection I experience when considering the ideals of home and domestic architecture. This exhibition reflects my current preoccupation with the adage “what makes a house a home” and responds to the challenges of claiming and shaping domestic space. I am particularly interested in the impact on homeowners of the consumer marketing of luxury goods and furnishings that resemble antiques or relics from the ornate baroque period.

This paper is a supporting document for an exhibition project entitled Felicitous Space which consists of 12 large scale oil on canvas paintings on display in a gallery setting.

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In the words of Michael Farnan: ah, I've licked that pig.

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FELICITOUS SPACE

The exhibition *Felicitous Space* is an inquiry into the significance of the emotional connection I experience when considering the ideals of home and domestic architecture. This exhibition reflects my current preoccupation with the adage “what makes a house a home” and responds to the challenges of claiming and shaping domestic space. I am particularly interested in the impact of consumer marketing and the way it guides homeowners towards ideas of luxury, elegance and a prescribed lifestyle of effortless style. While there are many different home improvement styles being marketed today, my curiosity lies mainly, although not exclusively, with marketing campaigns that advertise luxury goods and furnishings that resemble antiques or relics from the ornate baroque period. Many of the consumer objects that appear in this marketing, like chandeliers, Persian rugs and ornate chairs also appear in the paintings included in this exhibition although their presence has generally been exaggerated by a variety of visual means including size discrepancy, unusual placement within the spaces and of course, by colour. Ideals of the Baroque period such as nostalgia, theatricality and material excess were also explored in the paintings by metaphorically exploiting the physical properties of paint and pigment and by considering the impact of the over-life-sized paintings upon the viewer. Functioning as a threshold between the public and the private, the paintings invite viewers to enter the space of domestic architecture and encourage them to consider the charged psychological space of the extravagantly ornate interiors through their own personal and familial histories. In this paper, I will expand upon the ways my personal history as well as my exploration of the metaphoric possibilities of paint, and the act of painting itself; have informed the exhibition *Felicitous Space*.

When I was a child, I experienced a recurring and oddly comforting dream. In the dream, there was a white clapboard, two-story house and a sidewalk that divided the front lawn in half. The perimeter of the yard was staked out by a white picket fence with a gate. I never entered the yard, or the house, nor did I ever see anything or anyone inside it. I never saw myself standing in the yard and clearly it was the house that was the focal point. The dream was like a photograph except the grass would move as if I was physically present watching the movement of a gentle breeze.

The significance of this dream is augmented by a related childhood experience involving a family road trip across Canada. Somewhere in Quebec, I remember looking out of the passenger window and being mesmerized by the brightly coloured houses whose architecture was so foreign to me; suddenly I saw the house from my dreams. Its plain windows were framed in white wood unlike the homes in my neighborhood whose shuttered windows also often had stained glass accents. The house from my dreams looked plain and peaceful to me and left me with the feeling that I somehow belonged there. I never told my family about my dream or my experience of seeing the house. I was not frightened; I simply gazed at the house through the car window as we drove by as if fully absorbing its physical form; interestingly enough, I never had the dream again.

It is difficult to determine whether the experience of my recurring dream influenced my research interests as an artist. How does one use the written language to quantify how stimuli—such as a dream, an architectural form, or a mark or colour—may influence subsequent artworks or areas of inquiry given that the ideas and materials artists accumulate and draw upon are inherently personal and largely inexplicable? Similarly, how does one explain the psychological affect that an artwork has upon a viewer? Roland Barthes answers this question when he speaks of a

photograph of his now-deceased mother taken when she was young. He describes the Winter Garden Photograph as having “an essence of the Photograph” that only exists for him: “For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of a thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’; . . . at most it would interest your *studium*: period clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound” (73). Similarly, in an interview with Simon Schama, the painter Jenny Saville tries to verbally explain her attraction to a de Kooning painting by describing a mark within the painting that moves her emotionally:

Look at . . . how the black runs over the top of a yellow and you get a kind of warm-lit grey. Why is that so poetic? What is it? Within that one mark, it’s like a secret, something that words can’t touch; it’s nonverbal. It says nothing and everything. (128)

My childhood was not influenced by artworks but it was shaped by the distinctive setting of a coal mining town in the mountains of Southern Alberta where most of the houses were modest single story homes with exteriors of mainly white or pastel stucco, white wooden siding or grey asphalt shingles. I recall seeking out the decorative addition of small pieces of mirror that many of the stucco houses had embedded in their exterior walls and thinking that the families of such houses must be lucky and maybe even rich. As well as glittery exteriors, many of the neighborhood houses of my childhood had triple-arched windows mounted in the front of the attic space and as far as I know, this atypical architectural feature is unique to my hometown. I often use the triple-arched windows in my artwork as a marker of self-identification and to signify my idea of home.

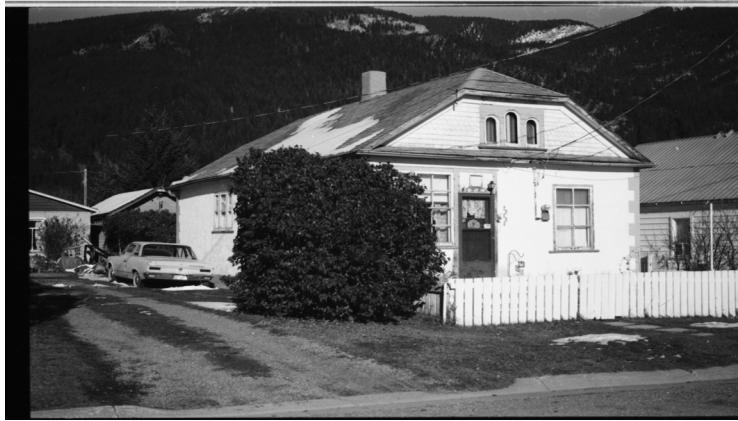


Plate 1: M. Eileen Murray. *Untitled*. B/W Photography, 2004.

My research into the emotional connection that I experience when I look at the exteriors of houses began by photographing many of the houses that were within a short walking distance of my earliest childhood home. As I photographed them, I recalled the sensation of childhood memories becoming all-at-once alive again as if they had just happened. This engagement with my childhood history informed my photographic process as I attempted to visually capture and display the essence of a memory. In this earlier body of work I printed the negatives using a solarizing technique that gave the prints the appearance of x-rays in order for the details of the houses to be slightly obscured. This technique resulted in images with a dream-like quality, which resembled a memory. As my practice developed, I investigated abandoned rural houses in the southeast prairies of Alberta and more importantly, my relationship with these sites of abandonment. I experience a strange calmness when exploring abandoned prairie homes and their over-grown yards and believe that I seek them out in order to experience a sense of nostalgia for my childhood home, a space that is no longer physically accessible to me except in my memory. Joe Moran discusses this connection in relation to Svetlana Boym's, *The Future of Nostalgia*:

. . . the word nostalgia is closely associated with the ideas of home: it comes from the Greek words *nostos* ('to return home') and *algia* ('longing'). This dual root, though, suggests an ambivalence at the heart of the term itself. It can represent both the desire to return to a stable and secure point, and a recognition that such desire is always painfully deferred because past experience is unrecoverable. (Moran, 34)



Plate 2: M. Eileen Murray. Untitled. Pinhole Photograph, 2010

Until the first summer of graduate school my art practice remained largely dependent upon the process and language of photography. During this transition, I realized that I desired the ability to distort the images that I was working with in a way that photography did not allow for. For example, I wanted to shift local colours as well as dissolve walls without the use of a computer, so I chose the medium of paint. I began experimenting with the properties of paint, through colour and line, to develop my research into my relationship with notions of the home. Interpreting images from online real estate ads as well as relying on my recollection of houses from my hometown, I created imagined representations by responding to simple sketches with

marks and colours applied instinctually to the canvasses rather than fulfilling any formal obligation to render the houses with accuracy.



Plate 3: Accessed online at <http://crowsnestpassrealestate.com>



Plate 4: M. Eileen Murray. *Hillcrest Haunt*. Oil on canvas, 2011

Colour became important to the paintings because of the impact it has on signifying a memory and notions of nostalgia. I queried whether a colour could prompt a recollection of a past event or time period, just as I recall the era of green living room carpets and orange arborite. Could using colours associated with specific eras within my paintings have the same impact on viewers? The colours in the painting *Billy & Genie's*, for example, made me nostalgic for my childhood years as the painting echoed colours that were reminiscent of the woolen sweaters that my sisters and I would wear in the Autumn; I wondered whether other people would experience similar emotions when looking at the work. Similar to signifying a memory, can a colour that is often associated with softness and warmth such as pink, exude a menacing presence by underpainting it with darker tones in order to promote a feeling similar to the feelings one has when waking from a bad dream?

Unexpectedly, these small exploratory “house” canvasses ended up all having one thing in common, insofar as each denied the viewer access into the domestic sphere of the home. Although I did not purposefully set out to do this in the paintings, the windows appear as though they are inaccessible and that fact alone was intriguing enough for me to explore methods of crossing the threshold into the interior of the home.



Plate 5: Plate 5. M. Eileen Murray. *Billy & Genie's*. Oil on Canvas, 2011

As my interest in the interior deepened, so did my recollection of my mother giving us lessons on how to dress appropriately for an occasion while decorating our rooms with floral bedspreads and matching wallpaper. I believe the rooms of a house are like our bodies insofar as how we dress the interior of our house is dictated, to some extent, by the social conventions and expectations that are performed within. Interiors, therefore, that have been dressed “appropriately,” have become theatrical constructs, ready to become a backdrop for the dramas of everyday life. My Grandmother’s home was a prime example of order and staging, and the activities and conduct of her grandchildren were always attuned to the possibilities and limitations of

rooms as she saw fit. For example, we were rarely permitted into the living room, especially in the summertime as we might warm the room up by “letting the cold air out”; that room was always for adults only and on the rare occasion that we were granted access, we were not to speak, as children were to be seen and not heard in that specific domestic space. We were, however, allowed into the den to play records and to dance while the adults were doing whatever it was adults did in the living room. I vaguely recall that the living room was outfitted with leather furniture and a set of what I considered exquisite elephant bookends. I cannot recall anything else in the room except the cold air blowing in from the window-mounted air conditioner. In contrast, I remember the layout and furnishing in the den with great detail. The room had brown walls and cream coloured curtains, a gold and brown plaid pull-out sofa, Grandma’s old recliner and piles of soft pillows. The shelves were filled with books and records and it was warm and cozy, like a hug. There we could listen to “Open the Door Richard” and sing on our stage to our heart’s content.

I thought of the freedom that my Grandmother’s den allowed us while considering the format for the paintings in the exhibition. I wanted to recreate the den’s potential for performance within the gallery, so I chose larger than life-sized formats for the paintings *Best Room*, *Tracey’s Study* and *Fiesta*. The size of these works as well as the bright colour, unexpected furnishings and material accumulations promotes the idea of theatricality in that the gallery is transformed into a forum; a theatre of sorts ready for the performance of interaction. The paintings then become highly decorated sets and the viewers in the gallery compare to actors in a play behaving according to the memories that they may recall of their own homes or other interior spaces all while viewing and interacting within the pictorial and illusory space of the paintings. I desire the viewer, as Bachelard describes in *The Poetics of Space*, to “read the rooms” that have

been put before them in their own terms; through their own distorted lens and to be able to imagine their own narratives as they contemplate the paintings. As Bachelard so eloquently expresses, I wish to “[unlock] a door to daydreaming” (14).



Plate 6: M. Eileen Murray. Installation view of *Fiesta* and *Best Room*. Oil on Canvas, 2012



Plate 7: Plate 7. M. Eileen Murray. *Tracey's Study*. Oil on Canvas, 2012

I vividly recall the two homes of my childhood: the first was a modest mobile home with a green carpet and an orange living room furniture set and the second was a timber structured home on a concrete basement. In the decade or so that I lived in the latter, I recall three different wallpaper patterns in the kitchen and dining area, as well as three different kinds of flooring, including carpet, linoleum and finally parquet patterned hardwood. The living room boasted heavy copper coloured velvet curtains that my Mother said were not to be touched by children; but I could not resist, I would secretly rub them as I wondered if my family was now rich like many of my neighbors whose homes had the mirror embedded in their stucco. Throughout my childhood our home was excessively rearranged and refurbished as my mother decorated and then re-decorated. It is apparent to me now that I share her penchant for excessive domestic decoration and just as she dressed her home, I have created the excessively decorative paintings within this exhibition.

While the research leading to *Felicitous Space* began with small paintings of exteriors, it matured into large, stage-like paintings of highly decorated interiors. In the introductory chapter to *Our House, The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture*, editors Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft suggest the idea of excess in the home moves beyond its primary role as a form of shelter.

. . . at some point someone considered . . . the best use of the available space to reflect the desires and the fears of the occupants. Thus was born the idea of the house as something *in excess* of its primary function as artificial shelter - as a place, in fact, which expressed something of the identity of the builder or owner or occupier, as well as something of the culture of the society in which it was built. (13)

The visual representation of the idea of excess within the exhibition is a multi-faceted one.

While the paintings reflect my interest in the spectacle of consumer consumption as it relates to the decorating and refurbishing of the home, they also reflect the need many people have to make their house into a version of an ideally grandiose edifice no matter how humble the basic structure. Like a woman elaborately creating and decorating her first home, the paintings in the exhibition have all been fashioned excessively through various methods. “Excessiveness” is created by using colour intensely and almost in a garish manner, by applying paint with aggressive and multiple brush marks, and by depicting grand spaces, busy patterns and crowded claustrophobic passages. The paintings of lavishly decorative interiors become commodities of spectacle themselves as they demand full attention from the viewer while insisting upon a bodily response.

In the mural-sized painting *Best Room*, I chose an empty yet sumptuously appointed room as a source image. My purpose in painting this image was to invert the feeling of welcome and comfort that one would expect in such a room while maintaining its surface beauty. I sought the creation of a space that one would not want to linger in on a subconscious level; a room with contrasting messages—one of warmth and openness and the other of cold sterility—that would perhaps leave the viewer perplexed on how he/she should interpret the space. Within the painting, I chose varying shades of blue to decrease the feeling of warmth as well as to propel the viewer’s gaze out of the space of the room. This coolness along with a sense of deep interior space heightens by integrating warm magentas and creams in the foreground of the work. Paint applied with a brush connected to a long dowel results in an aggressive and energetic brush stroke that creates a patterned and busy surface. The visual impact of the brush strokes also produces a feeling of displacement for viewers, much like a busy wallpaper pattern. As I painted the pattern of the throw rug and as the illusion of semi-translucent table legs appeared in paint, I was

thinking of Matisse and how the baroque contortions of the arabesques and garlands had become all-invading and had become the pure subject of his paintings (see Néret 16).



Plate 8: Henri Matisse. *Harmony in Red- The Red Dining Table*. Oil on Canvas, 1908. Image from Néret, *Matisse* 50.

Just as garlands had become all invading for Matisse, the cult of the home and the increase in consumerism directed towards the home has become all invading today. Marketing strategists sell goods by convincing homeowners, or would-be homeowners, that they deserve not only to own a home but also to own one filled with the very best in contemporary décor. During my research, I became highly aware of how corporations such as Restoration Hardware and Pottery Barn present the home as being a place of memory and imagination in order to introduce the idea of home as a place that can move our emotions beyond recognition as long as we decorate and renovate in a particular style. It is as if we can renovate and decorate our way into having the family or lifestyle of our dreams. Using images of rooms that are perfectly appointed and basked with warm light, for example, these corporations operate as Gaston

Bachelard describes in “hope to make others feel all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth” in order to “touch the ultimate poetic depth of the space of the house” (Bachelard 6).

Marketing strategists for home decorating and renovation corporations focus on evoking deep nostalgia while promoting the idea of opulence, a refined class and elegance. By using signifiers such as worn finishes, distressed wood, vintage fabric patterns on brand new furnishings and digitally replicated texture and colour from vintage photographs, commercials and advertising agencies have effectively used emotions associated with nostalgia to program the middle and working classes to want to achieve elegance, perhaps decadence and certainly to dress their home in a style that signifies what class they belong to or wish to belong to. Consumer marketing promises an effortless reunion of sorts with the ideals of elegance and grandeur. As Susan Stewart expresses in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, they have used the metaphor of texture to create this promise of reunion (see Stewart 139).



Plate 9: M. Eileen Murray. Detail of *Wallflowers*. Oil on Canvas. 2012.

Texture, muted colour and a break down of logical space lend the same promise to the painting entitled *Wallflowers*. Flowers and vines originating from the wallpaper pattern are painted to appear to be enveloping the structures of a marbled fireplace and an upright piano. These visual cues may be read as aging, worn-out and perhaps abandoned and were incorporated to signify nostalgia. The legs of the formal armchair have almost vanished into the stained pattern of the rug and the curves of the carved backrest have almost disappeared into the texture of the wall leaving the viewer to imagine the room and its furnishings as it must have been. This sense of nostalgia for another time, place or lifestyle is present in many of the paintings in the exhibition *Felicitous Space* and like *Wallflowers*, they evoke notions of luxury, elegance and hint at the ornate style of the baroque.



Plate 10: Lee Bul, *After Bruno Taut (Negative Capability)*, 2008. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Courtesy of the Artist and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York. Photo © NGC

Recently, the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Alberta focused on the Baroque period with the curated exhibition *Mislead by Nature: The Baroque in Contemporary Art*. Similarly, the exhibition *Felicitous Space* has also been influenced by features of the Baroque as it also explores:

material excess, accumulation, bravado, theatricality and the construction of immersive, emotive environments. The presence of what could be called ‘neo-baroque’ has, in recent time, been a recurring facet of contemporary art in Canada and around the world. (National Gallery of Canada n.p.)

Although she is not included in the above noted exhibition, Jenny Saville is a good example of a contemporary painter who has a concern for many aspects of the neo-baroque within work that consistently deals with matters of the flesh. In her 2005 interview with Simon Schama, Saville stated:

I like the spaces that large scale offers. The different space of encountering a painting from a distance to being very close-up to a painting, the physical relationship of your body to that scale of object and mark-making. It’s like entering a special visual language. When you go up close to a Twombly, it’s childlike, you’re sort of surrounded with all these fuzzy marks and scrawls and drips. Then you come back and all of a sudden you wonder, is it a boat, is this the sea? Then you realize that it’s a great sea battle, and that visual space is really what painting can do, especially on a large surface in relationship to your own body. (125)

The relationship of my body to my paintings was considered during the creation of the works for the exhibition *Felicitous Space* and I intentionally set out to create passages of paint that are positioned somewhere between abstraction and realism. I wanted to build a dichotomy between what a viewer thinks they are looking at from a distance and what is actually on the surface of the canvas. I struggled in pulling away from areas, in letting areas of the paint appear to be unworked, yet succeeded in activating other areas with an efficiency of minimal mark-making, allowing raw canvas and the marks made earlier in the painting to suggest notions of time and memory that are characteristics present within the practice of painting itself. Playing with the idea of the gaze in many of the paintings, I included playful and slightly abstracted nudes and surfaces that were viscous, like bodily fluids, to heighten the physical relationship to the paintings. I thought of myself as a voyeur or recorder of these domestic spaces as opposed to a creator of them. I chose to portray the female figure often found both within and upon the walls of domestic interior paintings, metaphorically through the use of feminized shapes, colours and through the playfully rendered pictures and magazines found within the paintings of the exhibition. I wanted the viewer to think in terms of the classic female nude from a distance but be denied detail, when upon closer inspection, the figures become nothing more than colour and shape.

Along with using my own history to explore notions of the home, there is a history of precedence that is inherent within the discourse of painting. Within this precedence, there is a self-referential modality and I do not believe that a painting can be created without it referring to a painting that was previously created. As a contemporary painter, my practice operates within the discourse of painting history; it makes sense for me to take from the past in order to create a conversation or perhaps a comparison between my work and the paintings and painters of yester-

day. This history enabled me to challenge painters from the past, such as Vuillard and Bonnard who painted easel-sized interiors and were mere spectators within the domestic space. They were guests within the spaces that they recorded as their place was not in the home and as a result, they rendered spaces with exquisiteness, orderliness and an air of lightness that most homeowners of today would not identify with. I enlarged the interiors into larger than life entities and rather than using local colour, I chose saturated and slightly garish colours to represent the dramas that unfold within the domestic environment unlike the placid colours once used to convey a sense of platitude.

The paintings in *Felicitous Space* are charged with energy through colour and mark-making and act as stage-sets designed for the contemporary dramas of everyday life. The exhibition was created in response to my interest in the domestic and the modern-day challenge of shaping our interior space. They were considered and executed within an art historical discourse that places them within the context of contemporary art. The colours, ornamentation and patterning were dreamily imagined and speak to the daydreams that occur within the actual space of a domestic setting as well as the recollections that I hope occur when a viewer enters or is denied access to the illusory space of the rooms. The large-scale format of the paintings exploited the characteristics of the theatre in order to transform the gallery into stages of domestic architecture welcoming viewers and voyeurs to remember their own familial histories while considering the paint. The paintings reflect the emotional connection that I experience when I consider the ideals of the home and represent my exploration into “what makes a house a home” by playing upon the emotions of nostalgia. They also mimic the desired effect of many home decoration and renovation advertising campaigns by signifying a desire for luxury, opulence and decadence.

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